

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Horizon

Vicky Tsaconas

We always left our things in the same place, opposite the grey house on the corner of Ormond Road, a street back from the kiosk that sold Four'n'Twenty pies in paper bags and sweaty Glad-wrapped sandwiches. Once I asked Dad why he always chose this spot. He said that it was the best place to swim because there was a clear path from shore to waist-deep. No rocks like there were further back.

He could work out whether the sea would be calm or choppy fifteen minutes before we reached it. It could be seen as soon as the bus reached the Alma Road hill. After he told me his secret, I put it into practice whenever we went to Elwood beach. A choppy sea was not something we looked forward to. I hate fighting the sea. We never turned around to go back. Just left earlier.

We always travelled by bus; we did not have a car until I was twenty. Our fellow passengers were my surrogate extended family. I felt sad when we all went our separate ways once we had arrived.

After our swim, Dad and I would climb onto the low rock wall protecting the foreshore. We did not lie on the sand until I was about fifteen and considered the wall daggy. I sunbaked on the wall. Dad just sat and watched. People, children, women probably. The sea. The horizon.

When the government started its campaign to educate people about the dangers of exposure to the sun, Dad did not go the beach as often as before. Not because of the campaign, but because his heart condition was worsening. He would sit bare-chested in our backyard. I would chastise him, tell him he would get skin cancer. He would laugh. Say the sun's good for you.

Angela and Peter, my cousins, sometimes came with us. Their mother worked on weekends and their father did not like the beach. I admired Angela because she was older than me, slim and olive-skinned; she tanned easily and could dive between our legs. She stopped coming to the beach when she got a job at the Coles Variety Store in Bridge Road, Richmond. Peter stopped when he turned sixteen.

Dad, Angela, Peter and Dimitri, an older cousin who had just arrived from Greece and boarded with us, taught me to swim. I still went to swimming lessons at school, proud that I could float, do breast-stroke, free-style and back-stroke. I went to fewer classes in high school because I could not bear to be seen in my bathers. Sinus problems were my excuse. I watched the others from the stand at the Richmond pool – the same stand from which I watched the swimming carnivals I never entered. The stand I now look up at while I do laps.

On our way home from the beach, Dad would buy me an ice cream, usually an Eskimo Pie, but sometimes a Choc Wedge, from the huge old milk bar on the corner of Barkly Street and Glenhuntly Road. I had to eat it immediately, before we reached the bus stop, otherwise it would melt all over the clean dress I had changed into.

At home, I would pretend I was swimming in our concrete backyard and then in the bath tub. I would have a shower immediately, to wash off the suntan lotion and sand. Dad liked to have a shower later because he believed salt water was therapeutic and should be left on one's skin for as long as possible. He never used suntan lotion. He tanned; I burned. Often.

On weekends we had dinner soon after we returned home. Mum would have made it while Dad and I were at the beach. She never came with us – she couldn't swim. We always seemed to

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have chicken and potato stew. Afterwards, Mum and Dad had coffee and talked about the day.

Dad told me about the salt sea baths in Σελιανιτικά, Selianitika, his village. People from all over Greece came to it. Σελιανιτικά is an intimate, pebble beach shaded by pine trees. Five-six steps and you are neck-deep. I often stumble on the rocks as I walk in. I have been warned about stepping on sea urchins. Hotels, apartments, tavernas and outdoor cinemas are so close you can walk barefoot between them and the beach. Σελιανιτικά is in the Bay of Korinth; in a couple of hours you can reach Πουμελη, on the other side by fishing boat. Dimitri, my cousin who returned to Greece after ten years in Melbourne, did this often during his holidays. His mother was from Πουμελη; sometimes he stayed there overnight, at his cousin's.

Elwood Beach was a bare sand beach with an old-fashioned kiosk at one end and a public toilet block at the other. The foreshore and houses were divided by a large area of vegetation and a busy four-lane road. You need to walk metres before the water reaches your waist. The sea-bed is sandy. Sometimes I fantasised about walking forever.

The first time I had an ice cream, seated, was in Σελιανιτικά. I had eaten gelati when I was at uni, usually with my friend Chrysoula, at the end of our last class, but always standing. The first afternoon my parents and I were in Σελιανιτικά, I had the 'Afrikan' (layers of pistachio, vanilla and chocolate ice cream covered with chopped nuts, and sour cherry sauce in a sundae glass) at the restaurant of the Hotel Αιγλη, two steps away from the water. It was the first time we had gone to a cafe together. I was twenty-two.

A year after Dad died, I went back to Σελιανιτικά. As I sat on a bench overlooking the sea, in September, when most tourists had gone, I remembered Elwood Beach.

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